

## COVID-19 cases in Teton County, WY

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EDUCATION

# Check Yes or No Consent



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As adolescents in a small town test the sexual boundaries of themselves and each other, is a risk-prone community failing to teach them the limits? Article published by: Sarah Ross, Planet Jackson Hole.

JACKSON HOLE, WY – In high school, Bella V. class of 2016, was student body president, captain of the Speech and Debate team, a dancer. She got

excellent grades, was close to her parents. She was ambitious, smart, talented.

But that is not always how she felt. Inside, she was losing herself, unraveling.

High school was a blur of accomplishments, performances and competitions, but it was punctuated by bad nights.

She learned to discern between really bad and a little bad. Really bad: a classmate pushing her up against a car and saying he should rape her. A little bad: a drunken, confused hookup where she remembered walking into a bedroom, getting undressed, and a couple other key moments, but not much else.

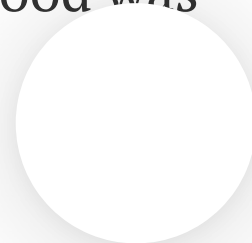
Wood now brims with confidence and enthusiasm. She laughs loudly, speaks clearly. She does not see anybody who would feel voiceless. But she

high school, “I lost my Bella,” she said. It took leaving Jackson to regain her sense of self.

At the time, Wood did not talk about the bad nights. She had already been assaulted by the time she learned about consent in school. Her boundaries were violated before she had the chance to establish them.

Anyway, to whom would she have spoken? Most people she hooked up with she had known her entire life. They were her friends. She felt that she and her peers had been unceremoniously cleaved together. To speak about what she was experiencing would have required rending these bonds, a separation of flesh from flesh that would have been painful and dangerous.

She may not have known at the time, but Wood was not alone.



Many of her peers, particularly young women, were also having bad nights. They were unknowing actors in a script that was written years, maybe decades, before. It was a script inherited from older peers that established the baseline of “normal” for early sexual experience. The foundations of the script were this: Consent was not a value. Coercion was the baseline. Male pleasure was emphasized. Alcohol was always present.

After 13 interviews with students who attended high school between 2005 and 2018, roughly 100 off-the-record conversations, and dozens of texts and Facebook comments and messages, it has become clear that traumatic early sexual experiences are extremely common in Jackson Hole.

While some interviewees had positive experiences and did not feel pressured, or were not sexually active, those who participated at all in hookup culture agreed that

they have had to heal from, or at least grapple with, their early sexual experiences.

Both men and women experienced violations, though women were much more likely to describe them as traumatic. Women were also more likely to later be assaulted in college and beyond. In all cases, nobody talked about what was occurring at the time. Many did not hear about consent or realize they had been assaulted or coerced until after high school.

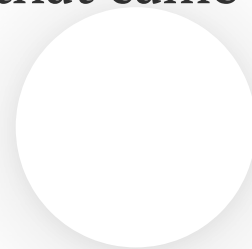
Subjects described being thrust into situations for which they were unprepared, where they felt pressure to keep up. As Cassandra Lee, class of 2008, said, “I was put into situations where I perceived pressure for me to be sexual before I was able to catalyze my own hopes or morals around it. I hadn’t formed a value set before I had to choose my path.”



## ‘I Have to See Him for the Rest of My Life’

Today Wood feels angry at her hometown. She says Jackson’s culture pushed her and her peers into situations for which they were unprepared. As she put it, “Risk is the number one thing we love. It’s like, ‘Wait, so you haven’t done this?’ ‘You haven’t dropped Corbet’s?’ ‘You haven’t done this drug?’ ‘You haven’t sucked his dick?’”

Her early sexual experiences required her to negotiate with the idea of what it means to “want” something. More than once, she knew even in the moment, “Oh, this is assault.” While Wood would not share the specifics, she knows what she experienced was assault. Other times it was less clear. She might not have exactly wanted to hook up with someone, but she wanted the story and the social capital that came with it.



In those instances, the guys she hooked up with seemed equally ambivalent. “It was more for the story than for ourselves,” Wood said. “To claim that I didn’t want it was probably not right. It wasn’t fun, but it wasn’t not fun. It wasn’t their fault. It was the fault of the system. We were not equipped with the tools to be doing what we were doing.”

Wood was a freshman when she became sexually active. For girls especially, there was pressure to start hooking up at a young age. There was a culture “of pushing, pushing, pushing boundaries,” she said. But, “I had no boundaries ... I didn’t even have the time to think about what I wanted to do, what I didn’t want to do.”

Wood is not alone. Madison\*, class of 2014, rarely visits her hometown, avoids talking about high school. (\*She and several other subjects chose to remain anonymous. Some have never told their parents about



their experiences, others feared retaliation from people who had assaulted them or did not want to expose such vulnerable information in a small town.)

Like Wood, Madison had multiple traumatic sexual experiences while at Jackson Hole High School. She had sex for the first time when she was 14 with a man 4.5 years her senior. “The culture was very predatory toward younger girls,” she said. “Nonconsensual things were happening, but I was so inexperienced with guys, they walked all over me. I had to act like everything was normal and not make a scene.”

“There was no regard for consent,” she continued.

“There was no regard for you as a person. If you weren’t down to perform ‘X’ sexual task, then what are you doing? ... If you didn’t have that social capital as a sexual object then you were irrelevant because there were other people who were willing.”

Jackson primed Madison to accept the unacceptable: “I had very negative experiences in college that I wouldn’t have tolerated if I wasn’t brought up in a community where I was trained to tolerate things in that way.”

Both Madison and Wood felt silenced by Jackson’s small town, tight-knit dynamic. It was difficult to stand her ground with classmates “because you have so much time left together,” she said. “I compromised so much not to offend. I felt like if I call someone out, I have to see him for the rest of my life.”

Some of the people who violated Madison were lifelong friends. There was nowhere to turn. Parents did not understand. As she put it: “Your parents imagine how people were in third grade.”

“To confront these realities in high school w  
been world shattering.”

Rather than shatter their own worlds, subjects squashed their discomforts and fears, they drank and they hooked up, unsure what was adolescent exploration and what was damaging. In the absence of conversation, these young people adjusted their internal experience to what seemed normal. Maybe it felt weird that a guy asked for oral sex so many times that “no” was eroded to “yes.” Maybe it did not feel right that girls were called sluts and guys were not. But an alternative did not seem available, so the discomfort was numbed, neutralized.

## The Roots of Trauma

For many subjects, the trauma crystallized after leaving Jackson. Madison, for example, did not fully comprehend that she had experienced both sexual coercion and domestic violence until she got to college. That was when her freshman year roommate discussed her own sexual assault.

“It was this epiphany moment. I thought there was an unspoken rule about just submitting to that kind of thing,” Madison said.

In high school, she ended up in situations where she felt tricked, felt she could not say no. Once, a guy asked her to hang out after school. They drove around for a while and then began to make out. When Madison did not want to go any further, he became frustrated, said she owed him. He had driven her around, after all.

Madison gave him oral sex because that was what was expected. It was the bare minimum of a hookup. It is what nearly all the female subjects of this article did to avoid having sex, to avoid escalating the situation.

“It was like some sort of ambiguous currency,” she said. “Like, ‘Oh if I make you go down on me \_\_\_\_\_ t rape.’”

The men seemed to think they were doing the girls a favor: “It was some form of convoluted chivalry, like ‘I won’t force you to have sex, but if you don’t blow me why are you here?’”

Madison felt pressure from older guys and abandoned by older girls. She said the older girls were harboring anger or hurt or resentment from their own experiences. Rather than stand up for or check in with younger girls, older girls became victims of their environment, of a toxic cycle. They saw the younger ones as “sluts,” as threats. She remembered mean looks, feeling ostracized, disrespected. More importantly, though, they were also very tolerant of the behavior of men in their grade.

Though older students accepted their peers’ behavior, they were also the victims of it.



This became clear to Madison when she experienced domestic abuse the summer after sophomore year. She had been casually dating a recent graduate, someone she had been involved with for years. Then one night he blew up. He was screaming, pushing her. Yelling. Throwing things. “My heart was pounding. That was my first panic attack.”

After graduating, she learned that a woman several years older than Madison who had dated the same man experienced the same thing. “I was shocked. I thought it was an isolated incident. I assumed she was the older woman that he respected, that he was just abusive toward me.”

The normalization of coercive behavior and assault silenced Madison. She still avoids talking about high school or coming home for too long. She has had nonconsensual experiences in college and w

recently diagnosed with PTSD. Her experiences in Jackson, she said, are at the root of that trauma.

“I had very negative experiences in college that I wouldn’t have tolerated if I wasn’t brought up in a community where I was trained to tolerate things in that way.”

While Jackson can seem idyllic from the outside, that assumption obscures some of the darker sides of the community.

Wood, for example, sees parents who are enamored with this town, who moved here to ski and be outside. They struggle to understand how a culture of extremes has trickled into their children’s lives, a toxic leak that silences young people who feel they are just supposed to be grateful to live here, no matter what.

“You will love where you came from,” is the implicit pressure Wood felt.

“But what if I don’t? What if I’m mad at where I came from? How do we make change here when people don’t see that change needs to be made? Our parents are not the ones who know.”

The discord between what Wood felt and what she thought she was supposed to feel can actually exacerbate the sensation of negative experiences. As John McIntosh, a professor of psychology at Indiana University South Bend, said in an interview about the high rates of suicide in ski towns: “If you live in an environment that’s interpreted and seen as perfect, that may lead you to feel even worse when you don’t feel good in that environment, and you may feel an even greater personal toll as a result.”





Sarah Long, PsyD, is a clinical psychologist who, for awhile, treated patients with eating disorders in Jackson. She saw that the forces impacting high school students were the same ones with which their parents grappled. Adults in Jackson also struggled with unnamed trauma, with the pressure to match an extreme culture. To help young people, Long said, “adults have to look at themselves. And they don’t always want to.”

Young people and adults alike were resigned to the culture in Jackson, Long found. They did not feel empowered to make change, and therefore internalized their pain, which often manifested in disordered eating. Students would disclose that they’d been assaulted, for example, but “it was like, ‘yeah, this is just how it is.’”

The people interviewed for this story demonstrated similar patterns. Women talked about eating disorders

as an almost boring and inevitable side effect of being raised in Jackson.

“They knew what was happening and that it was affecting their eating patterns, but they were not willing to do anything about it, nor did they feel they had the voice to do anything,” Long said. “There was a culture of secrecy and acceptance.”

## The Illusion of Choice

That culture of secrecy and acceptance enabled experiences that never should have happened.

Lauren\*, class of 2012, had some of those experiences.

For her, it started with calls. She was a freshman when two guys—friends, ostensibly—started driving to her house late at night, calling, texting nonstop. Their text messages might read, “Come hang out, (b) (6) me head.”

If she didn't answer, they would start honking the horn until she came outside. "My option was to sneak out and go with them or have my parents wake up," she said.

It made her anxious, she did not know what to do. Her easiest option, she decided, was to go along with it. She would get in the car, which they sometimes would not start until she agreed to do whatever they wanted her to do—like perform oral sex, for example. Then they would drive around or go to friends' parties.

Lauren hooked up with some of the other guys in that friend group too. The pressure was so intense it did not seem there was another option. "They would say, 'Everyone else does this' ... they made it seem like if I didn't do what they wanted, then I would be an outsider."



It was not just guys who pressured her. Girls wanted to fit in with the guys so they would pressure other girls to do stuff and then turn on them and berate them for it, Lauren said. That was one way girls could signal to guys that they were cool.

People from both genders called her a slut. Guys at school started to lie about having sex with her. “It was a disaster,” she said.

The expectation that she do whatever a guy wants made Lauren feel dehumanized, silenced. Her worth was measured in giving “great head,” she said. Her voice did not matter. Her worth as a person was not valued.

More than anything, though, she felt trapped. Whether it was intentional, young men seemed careful not to cross the line into what might be considered “real” assault. They gave her just a

choice that she was, indeed, making a choice—however impossible.

“You get stuck in a situation where [hooking up] wasn’t the only way out, but they made you feel like it was the easy way. The way you wouldn’t be an outsider,” Lauren said. “I remember thinking, ‘I can’t make a scene, they’re going to side with the guy.’”

In other words, there was a choice but only one.

When a Friend Assaults a Friend

Lauren’s suspicions were not wrong. Her senior year, she watched as her peers did “side with the guy.”

After freshman year, Lauren had left Jackson for the summer to recover. When she came back, she remembered thinking “I need to be really smart about what I do. I need to hold it together.” She grew fast, she said, and felt on guard. The rest of high school was easier, but she saw the cycle she had

experienced repeating. Other girls became the “slut,” were pressured into sex, drank too much.

Then, senior year, she witnessed the culmination of this toxic culture. She was at a house party when she prevented a rape.

She walked into a bedroom to check on an inebriated friend and saw a classmate pulling down his pants and undressing a woman, face down and asleep. She pulled him off and punched him.

“I don’t remember most of it,” she said. “I remember hitting him.”

He was a close friend, so too was the victim.

Rather than emphasizing the assault, some classmates made fun of her for punching him. “I was so embarrassed that I lost control, that I hit sor

Lauren said. She did not know what to do, who to talk to.

Nothing ever came of it. The young man faced no academic, social or legal consequences.

Much later, the assailant apologized to the victim. Lauren is still friends with him now. “If he settled it with her, I won’t hold a grudge,” she said. “It took a lot for him to own up to it.”

She knew what happened was wrong, but high school had numbed her to the severity of the situation. Had everything been a little different, Lauren said, she might not have stopped it: “If I hadn’t known how drunk she was, if I hadn’t already seen her sleeping, I might not have done anything.”

It was not until college that she recognized what happened in high school was not normal. When the student filed a Title IX suit against the school for

mishandling a sexual assault case, Lauren realized everything the young woman described in that case had happened to Lauren and her peers in high school.

“That was very weird for me because I realized that’s actually not right. Those things aren’t supposed to happen and if they do you’re supposed to say something.”

### What About the Boys?

Talking about women’s trauma is becoming more common, accepted, especially amid the #MeToo movement. As Peggy Orenstein, acclaimed author of *Girls and Sex*, told Planet Jackson Hole, “We’re more comfortable talking about girls as victims of sexuality than as agents of it.”

Men’s behavior and experiences, on the other hand, are more of a mystery. What, for example, motivated the young man who attempted to rape Lauren?



friend? In no other area of his life did he reveal a capacity for violence.

After *Girls and Sex*, Orenstein has turned her focus to young men, trying to understand their side of the story.

Surprisingly, a large part of that story is that men also have sex they do not want. Her research has demonstrated that boys are also coerced or pressured into sex, though there is less room in the culture for those experiences.

“When boys were saying that they were having experiences that were unwanted or nonconsensual, I almost didn’t hear it,” Orenstein said. “It didn’t compute.”

While the young women Planet Jackson Hole interviewed had similar stories—being coerced

oral sex, feeling silenced—young men had a more wide range of experiences.

They were more likely than the young women to say that the hookup culture was benign or unmemorable. They were less likely to say they had nonconsensual sex, even though most would say they did things they did not want to do. They were also more likely to assume that sexual experiences should feel pleasurable for them.

Still, they often felt pressured, disconnected from their own desires.

Jessie Ford, a doctoral candidate at NYU's Department of Sociology, found that reports of unwanted sex, outside of rape, are actually relatively similar across genders. While women experience more harassment, assault and fear, men also have unwanted sex for similar reasons as women.

They are afraid of embarrassing themselves or their partner. “Men consent to unwanted sex because accepting all opportunities for sexual activity is a widely accepted way to perform masculinity,” she wrote. They feel pressure to keep a sexual interaction smooth and fear ridicule for being a “man who declines sex with an attractive woman.”

Orenstein has heard stories of men waking up with a condom on the floor but not remembering sex, not sure where they are, not sure who they are with. Some of them become depressed, angry. Others do not think it is a big deal. Most “don’t feel damaged, but they don’t feel great.”

“Even if they say it doesn’t affect them, or if they feel like they’re supposed to find it funny, or be happy because any sex is sex,” that does not mean there aren’t insidious consequences, Orenstein said. Men might be “shaping themselves to the narrative”

of being sexually confident and libidinous even if that's not what they feel inside.

Understanding the pressures young men feel and act on is critical to addressing sexual assault, Orenstein said. After all, so much of the consent conversation revolves around teaching men to hear and respect “no.”

But “how can you recognize and respect ‘no’ in somebody else if you aren’t allowed to say it yourself?” Orenstein said.

‘It Was Just Fun at the Time’

In high school, Wood, Lauren, and Madison, felt objectified. They felt as though they were valued by their male peers solely for their bodies, their sexual willingness. That was not a misinterpretation on their part. As Trevor\*, class of 2011, revealed, some young men who attended JHHS truly did treat

female peers as though they existed only for male pleasure. Whether that is actually how individual men felt, objectifying and demeaning women was one way to prove their masculinity and worth.

For Trevor, high school was a blast rather than a source of trauma. “It was a party culture,” he said. “It was like who’s gonna hook up, who’s gonna watch, who’s gonna get wasted. It was just fun at the time.”

Sex was the objective of partying. “That was where the fun came from, trying to get some tail, talking about it later on, laughing about it.”

Trevor first heard about friends having sex his freshman year. “One of my buddies had sex with one of the seniors ... after that, it just turned into, alright, this is the game. I guess I’ll play it.”

Unlike most of his friends, Trevor was in a sexual relationship for two years. The first time he and his

girlfriend had sex, he was 16 and she was 18. They were at a party and “she was wasted,” he said. “I’d had two beers and she was all over me.”

He thought she was too drunk, kept saying it was a bad idea. But her friends were pressuring her, pushing the two of them into a bedroom: “They thought it was time for her.”

The next day, Trevor said she was “kind of bummed.” At the time, he suspected she might regret it, and he might too. But the pressure had “cramped it.” He wanted to be among the group that could say, “I’ve done it.”

He apologized: “It’s not the way I would have done it —with people banging on the doors and trying to break in.”

Trevor wasn’t interested in hooking up with [REDACTED] outside of a relationship, but he watched his friends,

drank with them, went to the parties, talked about what happened.

He recalled the conversations about sex often demeaned women in some way: “It was like, ‘I can’t believe we just took this chick, I banged her and then you banged her!’”

They would share their stories, high five. They had nicknames for promiscuous girls. “Meatpocket” is one he remembered. It all seemed in good fun. They assumed the girls had equivalent nicknames for the guys.

“There was a sense of pride that came from sexual activity and whoever it was with,” Trevor said. “My friends back then, the way they talked about it, they were putting girls down. That was fun, it was what we did all the time. We were young and dumb. It made me feel better about ourselves.”

Girls were judged on what they would or wouldn't do. "It was like, will she give head? Will she fuck? How far will she go? If you get with this one you're getting it all the way in."

They didn't have sex with girls because they necessarily liked or respected them. They did not really care about the girl's experience. Male pleasure was emphasized. "We would just laugh and giggle when we talked about sex, talk about finishing wherever on her. There was never any talk about her finishing."

"It was like, will she give head? Will she fuck? How far will she go? If you get with this one you're getting it all the way in."

Though Trevor said he was mostly outside of hookup culture, that he was "of it, but not in it," he remembers two notable incidents where he



participated in the culture around him that objectified women.

The first happened when he was a sophomore. An eighth grader sent him nude photos. She had already hooked up with high school students. “She was just very sexual,” Trevor said.

The next day, he went to school and showed everybody. “We all laughed, like she’s in eighth grade and she’s got a great rack.”

Trevor sent the picture to two friends, a boy and a girl. From there it “spread like wildfire.” School administrators found out. Trevor and his male friend were charged with permitting obscenities and put on diversion for nine months, which meant that rather than be incarcerated or receive an equivalent sentence, he completed a program that monitored behaviors, that he did not drink or do drugs.

He thought it was “bullshit” that the female student he had sent the photo to did not get in trouble.

The next incident happened at the annual senior year camping party. He had been drinking, talking to a cute girl—a friend. He kept asking her if she wanted to go to the car. “That wasn’t me speaking, that was the drinking, the pressure from around me. She didn’t really want to. I wasn’t forceful physically, but I was like, ‘Come on, come on.’ Then I passed out wasted and she went back to the party.”

He reflected on both incidents with a level of regret. He knows the girl who sent the photo struggled. “I wonder how much of that comes from me and spreading the photo. I hope I didn’t have a large part in damaging her.”

Besides that, though, Trevor says some of what happened was just a part of growing up, not knowing

what was normal: “I feel like I didn’t know enough about anything to know what was good or bad or right or wrong ... a girl having sex with two different guys in one night, for example, I didn’t know at the time if that was OK.”

If he tried to speak out, “my friends would have laughed at me, like it’s no big deal, we don’t mean anything by it,” he said.

“It was just us trying to figure it out. That’s just how life is.”

## A Box to Check

While Trevor revealed one part of young male sexuality—the bravado, the misogyny—men are also hurt by hookup culture and coercive sex.

Henry Sollitt and Sam French, 2013, say they experienced pressure in high school, and some

early sexual experiences they now see as a part of an unhealthy culture.

Unlike the young women interviewed for this story, Sollitt, French and some of their male friends had a sexual grace period for the first couple years of high school. While the girls in their grade hooked up with older students—what they referred to as “cradle-robbing” or “freshman-slaying”—the guys mostly just talked about sex.

The pressure to hook up started a little bit later for them. They described hookups as casual. Treating sexual relationships or experiences as significant or emotionally important was not part of the culture. “I convinced myself they were very casual,” Sollitt said. “Not all of them were necessarily positive, but they were normal.”



In fact, there was huge pressure to be normal. “That was my biggest memory from high school—going into junior year thinking I have to check that box,” French said.

Because some of the girls in their grade had already had sexual experiences with older students, “it was a trend in my circle of friends for a guy to lose his virginity to a more promiscuous girl,” French said. That was the case for French and Sollitt and many of their friends.

“If you wanted to engage sexually, the best way wasn’t to enter a committed relationship but to go out with certain girls,” French said. They knew who the “slutty” girls were, they knew where to go. “Older guys pursued younger girls who then pursued younger guys,” Sollitt said.



It was at a party when Sollitt first had sex. It was with someone he didn't know very well. They had not cultivated a physical or emotional connection. It was confusing for Sollitt, because while he wanted to "check the box," he didn't initiate the sexual activity.

That was the case with other hookups. "I didn't feel like the driver, I wasn't initiating relationships. I was being led from one room to the other. I wasn't the one leading, I didn't know what to do next, I didn't know what the next step was ... I had no idea what sex and relationships were supposed to look like. In that vacuum, I just continued with what seemed normal."

The young women he hooked up with seemed more sexually experienced than he, and he didn't want to let on that he felt unsure.

"I thought that if I had conversations about [redacted] or what happens next, I would give away the fact [redacted]"

had no idea what I was doing,” Sollitt said.

Hookups followed a template that Sollitt felt obligated to follow. “I wasn’t even targeting my sexual experiences as something that was supposed to be a celebration of a pleasurable thing,” Sollitt said. “It was more like this is step A and this is step B and this is step C.”

Men and women alike seemed in agreement about what those steps were.

Female pleasure, for example, was not a part of the routine, not discussed. Sollitt did not recall a lot of reciprocation in high school. “You never would have heard, ‘Billy went down on Jenny,’” Sollitt said.

Consent also was not discussed. They did not talk to their partners about it, or to one another about realities of sexual relationships—beyond high school when someone lost their virginity. “It wasn’t officially

stated in my family, but the expectation was no sex until marriage,” French said. “The expectation was pretty off reality.”

In college, Sollitt heard from female friends that every one of them had experienced assault. He now is more aware about gender privilege and understands that girls from high school responded to their own pressures, that they might not have been as willing or confident as they seemed. Many of them may have already experienced nonconsensual sex.

“I thought that if I had conversations about consent or what happens next, I would give away the fact that I had no idea what I was doing.”

Still, it’s complicated, Sollitt said. While it is necessary to name assault and call out male privilege, that’s not what it felt like for him as a high school student. “No 16-year-old kid is engaging in the



relationships understanding a power dynamic, the social pressures,” he said. More often, they are following a template—one that emphasizes male pleasure and does not encourage communication. “Socially and in the power dynamic I was in control,” Sollitt said.

But that’s not how it felt. He felt little agency.

“There’s a vacuum of healthy relationships and conversation” to demonstrate alternatives to what was normalized. “It wasn’t in sex-ed, it wasn’t with parents. In the absence of particular conversation, you’re leaving it up to external forces.” The impact can be traumatic, Sollitt said, but that is not always, not often, the intent.

Following a template for sexual experiences that does not adjust for individual boundaries, desires meant that many hookups happened in a grey

kind of OK, kind of not OK. This obfuscated what was truly not OK.

Back to that Fateful Night

Sollitt was also at the same party where Lauren saw the attempted rape. He too was friends with both the assailant and the victim.

He remembered seeing the aftermath, seeing female classmates huddle around the victim, and the offender talking to his male friends. He had no idea how to respond.

“It was obviously nonconsensual, it was almost certainly illegal,” he said. But because of his friendship with both the victim and the attacker, he didn’t do anything. “It’s difficult because [he’s] someone I still see, someone I’ve had a relationship with since 1999. I recall almost immediately to the defense of the male student, thinking

way he could have done it. I've known this person my entire life. They're not capable of that."

The forces that silenced Madison, Lauren, and Bella Wood—the knowledge that their experiences would be dismissed in order to maintain a social order established in kindergarten—silenced Sollitt, too. To name what happened would require losing a piece of himself, his own childhood, his understanding of who his friend was. The stakes were too high.

Because he did not see what happened, because of his friendship, "it was easy to remain willfully ignorant of what might have happened." The words "assault" or "rape" were not used to describe the incident.

"I honestly don't know who I would have turned to," Sollitt said. "Going to the police didn't feel right we were at a party where everybody is underage

there was drinking and drugs. Nobody talked about it even though it was clearly wrong.”

‘I Had No Idea it Wasn’t Consensual’

The normalization of unwanted or pressured sex and the lack of conversation, communication, and consent set the groundwork for distressing experiences like Lauren’s friend, and for Noah\*, class of 2011.

For most of high school, Noah did not feel that he was seen as “a sexual figure.” He was a nice guy, friends with everybody, on the baseball team, disinterested in hookup culture. He felt uncomfortable with what was considered normal. His senior year he went to a few parties, saw people drinking and hooking up. It just felt wrong.

On the bus to baseball tournaments and in the locker room, his teammates talked about girls, what they would do and what they would not do, showed

other pictures of nude classmates. “It happened all the time,” Noah said.

Sometimes he felt like he had to participate. “If I was ever to say that stuff now, I would be absolutely embarrassed.”

At dances, there was pressure to grind—that was the only way people danced. “If you didn’t do that, you were on the outside,” he said. Again, it didn’t feel right but he participated.

The pressure to be manly, to be “cool” was intense. The “cool” guys were the ones “who had the freedom to do whatever they wanted to do.” Noah was a “late bloomer,” he lacked that power.

This changed at the end of senior year. He developed a relationship with a cool girl, a sexually experienced classmate. “She was in a higher class than me, she was more of popularity,” Noah said, “She was talked about by a

lot of guys—what she was willing to do. Then I felt the pressure.”

He heard about her previous sexual experiences, and guys began to ask, “Bro, are you going to do XYZ with her?”

When they started seeing each other, it moved fast. They made out one time at his house, the next time they saw each other they had sex.

“My first sexual intercourse is what you’d call rape,” he said.

He had gone over to her house, and they were sitting on the couch making out. “It escalated quickly. She pulled down my pants and pulled down her pants, and she put me in her.”

It was over quickly, and Noah was in shock.

“Everything was confused, it was such a blur, I

honestly don't remember details." He felt out of control, which, as the man, confused him. He did not know how he could have stopped or slowed down what happened so fast.

"I almost felt like the sexual programs I went through in middle and high school weren't good enough," he said.

They had sex one other time, and it happened the same way. "I felt like I had to since I'd already opened the bottle you can't re-close."

He didn't talk about it with anybody. When he got to college, he told people he was a virgin. To this day, no one knows what happened.

At the time, he had "no idea that it wasn't consensual," but he knew it did not feel right. I pushed to do it for sure. I don't know what si

It wasn't what he'd been expecting—he had been taught that as a man he needed to “ask three times” before doing anything. He did not expect to be in the position of being violated. “Women are always talked about as the victim,” he said.

Noah said he does not know if the experience was traumatizing, but he does know that he reflects on high school differently now. He was pressured into things he never wanted, he felt alienated from himself. Now he feels that resisting that pressure in high school is extremely difficult work, but worth it. “It requires faith in a higher power, faith in yourself as a person, and extreme and unbelievable foresight into who you are impacting now and not just what's happening.”

Older students have a lot of power—if he had more upperclassmen modeling healthy relat



consensual sex and communication, he may have understood there were alternatives, Noah said.

Indeed, young people must see alternatives if they are to make more positive choices. To interviewees, for example, it may have seemed that most people enjoyed hookup culture or that it was their only option. In reality, this hookup culture is positive for very few people.

According to sociologist Lisa Wade, who spent five years researching college sexual culture, only 15 percent of people truly enjoy hookup culture, though most students assume others enjoy it more, and that other people are hooking up a lot more than they actually are.

As Sollitt put it, “All I heard was that sex is something that you shouldn’t be doing at that age, and of relationships was totally excluded. So I had a

what a sexual relationship should look like. I had no idea what a progression of feelings and physical contact and intimacy should look like.”

## Feeling ‘Bold and Brave’

Drinking was inextricably linked with Jackson’s youth hookup culture, and blurred the already confused understanding of consent. “Without drinking, none of this happens,” Wood said.

Drinking played a few roles in these hookups. First, it facilitated them.

“Alcohol isn’t just about loosening inhibitions,” Orenstein said. “It’s the reason to have sex. Not because you like somebody or because you think the person was cute. You have the carelessness to do something you don’t want to do.”



It also made it harder for interviewees to be clear about what was consensual and what wasn't.

Alcohol being so linked to sex is dangerous for everybody, Orenstein said. "Boys are much more likely to assault when they're drunk, they're much more likely to not listen. People are less likely to step in as bystanders. It's risky for everyone."

That, of course, includes adults.

Shannon Nichols is the director of education and outreach at the Community Safety Network. Those who seek out the services of CSN are mostly adults, but Nichols said that in all her years at CSN, "it's difficult to think of one sexual assault survivor who didn't have alcohol involved."

"People who have predatory sexual behaviors use alcohol to seek out people who use alcohol because they're easier prey," Nichols explained. "It lowers

inhibitions, it makes us more aggressive, and it allows culpability to be placed on somebody who is unable to articulate what they want or don't want."

Though alcohol and assault are related, Nichols said it is a misconception to blame assault on alcohol. Sexual violence does not decrease when alcohol is removed from the equation. It may not change predatory sexual behaviors, including coercion, manipulation and physical force, Nichols said. However, it is easier to manipulate people who are intoxicated, she said.

"There is a norm in our town of extreme sports, extreme drinking, extremes in every way. We reward people who have extreme skiing feats. There's an underlying pressure to take risks and try extreme behavior for adolescents as well as adults."

In high school, young people are experiment with sex and alcohol: "When people are

experimenting with two new things, they are risk at for making bad judgments, or being unclear about their decisions.”

As with many aspects of Jackson’s culture, the drinking norms are extreme. And this starts young. Teton County adolescents are drinking, by some measures, at some of the highest rates in the state.

According to the 2016 Prevention Needs Assessment, 26 percent of Teton County seniors reported binge drinking within the last two weeks, the third highest percentage in the state. More than 40 percent reported drinking in the last 30 days. Teton County’s sixth, eighth, 10th and 12th graders all consume alcohol at a rate higher than the Wyoming average.

Law enforcement data mirror these numbers.

Planet Jackson Hole obtained information from the Jackson Police Department showing that in the years

interviewees attended high school, there were 685 Minor in Possession and Minor Under the Influence charges. More than half of those charges occurred in a four-year period between 2007 and 2011 when 527 students attended JHHS. The highest rate of charges was in 2008, when 94 incidents were filed. That represents roughly 18 percent of the student body.

The high rate of alcohol use among local young people may be connected to Jackson's drinking culture.

More than 75 percent of eighth graders in Jackson reported attending a gathering in the last year where large amounts of alcohol were available. More than 70 percent reported attending a community event where they witnessed intoxicated adults. These were the highest numbers in the state.

This does not come as a surprise to Trudy Fu  
executive director of Curran Seeley. What is

considered normal drinking in Jackson, she said, is actually quite high: “A lot of our events in Jackson have alcohol included in them, and unfortunately it’s very often abusive use rather than responsible use.”

According to the American Medical Association, consuming three drinks in one sitting can be considered abusive use of alcohol. In many settings, three drinks is the minimum for Jacksonites.

Funk sees that the normalized overuse of alcohol is connected to Jackson’s overall tendency to reward risk-taking behavior. “There is a norm in our town of extreme sports, extreme drinking, extremes in every way. We reward people who have extreme skiing feats. There’s an underlying pressure to take risks and try extreme behavior for adolescents as well as adults.”

Nichols agreed. “In Jackson, the mentality is go home.”

And that pressure is often gendered. Some of the most celebrated people in Jackson are extreme male athletes who young people idolize. Young men in particular see that masculinity relies on risk-taking, being bold and aggressive.

Alcohol, Nichols said, is one way men can feel bold and brave.

### An Insidious Culture

If adults do not acknowledge the darker side of Jackson's culture, that makes it difficult for young people to talk about it.

Dr. Sarah Long witnessed the consequences of not speaking. Substance abuse, sexual violence—those were not things her patients knew how to articulate. So they turned in on themselves.

“When something happens to your body that is traumatic, you have a sense of loss of control,” Long



said. “One thing you have control over is your weight and food intake. It’s how you regain power. Eating disorders are also pretty powerful at shutting down any anxiety or emotion or trauma response.”

Long’s clients lived with debilitating anxiety as a result of sexual violence, though many of them, like Wood, appeared as though their lives were perfect. They did well in school, had friends, but inside, they were crumbling.

Many Jacksonites have the ability to put on a good front. Residents tend to be high-achieving, fit and ambitious. These characteristics mask pain.

“I think in general there were a lot of eating disorders in Jackson, and it goes unrecognized ... because everybody is expected to be thin and athletic,” Long said.



There are some personality characteristics that contribute to eating disorders “and a few are prevalent in Jackson,” Long said. “There’s this perfectionist piece, for example, being expected to be great at everything, being the best athlete, being smart, being pretty. You see parents struggling with that, and their kids too.”

Some of this pressure is gendered. While all residents may feel pressure to fit into Jackson’s culture, women are still less likely to be represented in the outdoors—the arena where Jacksonites are perhaps most respected—and more likely to carry the burden of perfection, being the ideal mother, athlete and partner.

Business owner Kelli Jones has been in Jackson since 2002 and has observed how this dynamic exists just in the schools, but throughout the community and how it can hurt people.

Jones has seen not just how perfectionism is rewarded, but also risk-taking behavior, and how that behavior is associated primarily with men, which allows them to get away with a lot. This is the behavior that young men in town look up to, emulate.

In a town where people joke about “Peter Pan Syndrome” and “Never Never Land,” few think about the consequences of men not growing up. Jones said she’s noticed a trend of women in unbalanced relationships, where they work, are primary caregivers to children, manage the homes, and their own health and happiness. Meanwhile, their male partners continue to pursue their own interests with less investment in shared responsibilities.

“I find myself giving bad advice to friends, like, go into this relationship with no expectations, he’ll grow up when he has kids, he’ll stop drinking whe

kids ... he'll give 100 percent in your relationship one day.”

In her friend groups, Jones has seen imbalances in relationships. The men, for example, tend to have more time to pursue their individual interests. They might have time to get out for a two-hour bike ride, while women stay with kids, get out less. It's reasonable to expect more from relationships, though, and equitable relationships do exist in Jackson. Jones and her partner have been together for 13 years, partially because Jones has worked hard to create and respect her own boundaries, to make sure her relationship is balanced.

She is accustomed to being the one woman in male-dominated, outdoor-oriented spaces. At the Outdoor Retailer Show, for example, she was one of few female founders with a booth for her business Noso

Jones has been struck by the dearth of women in Jackson's outdoor sphere, though that is changing. "There were not many girls to ski with when I first moved here," she said. As a Division One collegiate athlete, Jones was eager to break into the sports world, and found that it was very male-dominated. One way to get access to that world was to befriend men, some of whom seemed to only care about skiing and biking.

"You can guarantee a 15-minute conversation if you talk about skiing," Jones said. The problem, though, is that there is a lot more to Jackson than the powder, but some people seemed disinterested in contributing more to the community, or even their relationships. "There are more stories here, more than guys skiing off cliffs."

This culture, which encourages men to pursue their own desires at the expense of others, trickles into the

high school. It impacts the behavior rewarded in men and the way that people view women.

As Fuller Ross (brother to this author), class of 2015, wrote in a July 2017 article for Planet Jackson Hole, “I can vividly remember sexist jokes being made by coaches, teachers, and other adults about girls’ ability to ski, drive in the snow, play sports, etc. As a boy, I grew up being told Jackson Hole was my playground. This idea translated into a culture of entitlement that spanned from the law to relationships to what we said to and about girls.”

## Persistent Norms

Many of the experiences described in this article are still common.

Lily\*, a Jackson Hole High School junior, and her classmates have heard a lot about consent, but in her friend group, there is still a lot of press-

“Now, guys will ask but even if you say ‘no,’ they’ll keep pressuring you and they won’t stop until they get what they want. They’ll be like, ‘Not to pressure you, but do you want to hook up?’ If you say, ‘Not tonight,’ they’ll keep asking all night.”

Technically, it’s consensual, “but it doesn’t feel good,” she said. “I don’t think they realize how hard it is when they keep nagging.”

It’s the norm to say “yes” when a guys asks.

“Throughout the entire school it’s almost like if a guy wants to hook up it’s kind of like you have to.”

She and her friends have all experienced pressure, done something they did not want to. But she seems nonplussed, or resigned. Everyone knows it is an issue, but that’s the way it is, she said. “It’s going to be this way, you just have to get used to it.”

As in previous years, Lily reported that every single hookup happens under the influence of alcohol. “If we’re sober, this doesn’t happen.”

Girls end up taking the brunt of any shaming. This year, a guy hooked up with a girl and told everybody what a certain part of her body looked like, made fun of it. Everybody was talking about it, laughing. The girl was humiliated. Guys will say things like, “she has a great body but her face ruins it.”

Within her friend group, Lily and the girls are trying to get through to the guys, to tell them it’s not OK for them to talk about young women that way. The men seem to be listening now more than ever. The sexual pressure the girls feel, though, is not something they have been able to articulate to their guy friends—the same ones pressuring them.





“Now, guys will ask but even if you say ‘no,’ they’ll keep pressuring you and they won’t stop until they get what they want. They’ll be like, ‘Not to pressure you, but do you want to hook up?’ If you say, ‘Not tonight,’ they’ll keep asking all night.”

Conversations about sex can be somewhat superficial: “It’s less about how it was and more about what you did,” Lily explained. It’s a box to check, not an experience to enjoy.

These words were echoed nearly verbatim by Cassandra Lee, who graduated a decade ago.

“When we talked about it, we would ask ‘how far did you go?’ not ‘how good did it feel?’” she said.

Making a Dent

Change may be slow, but it is happening.



Jim Jenkins is at the vanguard of shifting the sexual culture at the high school. He is in his second year of teaching Gender in Society Today (GIST), an elective class for sophomores, juniors and seniors that he spearheaded. (It's worth noting that the majority of students in the two sections of GIST—close to 40 students—agreed that the dynamics described in this article continue to be true for current high school students.)

Jenkin's class goes beyond defining consent.

His students have conversations about rape culture, male privilege, porn, alcohol and consent, healthy relationships, confidence and hookup culture.

He also teaches the freshman sexual education curriculum. He is bound by the Wyoming Standards, which means that eight of the 25 classes related to sex ed, and the focus is on pregnancy, STDs, and

making skills. But because of his passion for helping students understand healthy relationships, he also devotes a lesson to consent and victim-blaming.

Jenkins was inspired to create the class when his daughter turned 15, entering “the demographic where one in four women experience sexual assault.” Jenkins hopes to help students see that though the pressures of high school may feel all-consuming, students are still empowered to make choices for themselves.

“They need to be able to look at things with a critical eye and ear, no matter what they’re receiving—stories from friends, stories from the media.”

These are the conversations Bella Wood says she wishes she could have had in high school. “We didn’t talk about how sex actually feels, what it’s actually like. We watched sperm swimming. I learned about consent senior year, when I’d already been assaulted.”

Kids of all ages need to learn about how to set boundaries, how to respect other people, how to create healthy friendships and relationships, Wood said.

And, there needs to be an emphasis on men. “Women have dealt with this for a long time. We need men to step up. Every woman I know has been assaulted or harassed, but no guy knows anybody who has assaulted or harassed a woman. Consent needs to be taught in kindergarten,” Wood said.

Cassandra Lee reiterated Wood’s words: “I’m still working through what was traumatic and what was just bumbling teens, but the thing that is clear to me is we need to make mutual, enthusiastic consent the focus. I don’t think anyone was available to give consent in those settings, it got so messy.”



She imagines a sexual culture where all participants are eager, willing, aware and respectful. Young women, in particular, need to learn that sex can and should feel good, “that it’s OK to say no, and also to say yes.”

Jenkins’s class could be helping to shift the culture in this direction but Orenstein wants to see more drastic, systemic changes. She called for a sex-ed system like that of the Dutch. “Doctors, teachers, and parents talk candidly about sex, pleasure, and mutual trust, rather than focusing on just risk and danger.” They see sexuality as a source of creativity, exploration, and emphasize the female experience.

“It’s not just that boys have erections and ejaculation and women have unwanted pregnancy. There is more to the female experience than that,” Orenstein  
And, when girls know more about themselves  
their own pleasure, evidence shows they are more

discerning about their sexual behavior, Orenstein said.

The Dutch approach has indeed proven successful. There are lower rates of teen pregnancies, STDs, and rape and both genders report healthier and more positive sexual experiences. Adolescents also have access to free family planning services and low-cost emergency contraception.

“We didn’t talk about how sex actually feels, what it’s actually like. We watched sperm swimming. I learned about consent senior year, when I’d already been assaulted.”

Meanwhile, the United States has some of the highest rates of teen pregnancy, STDs, and unprotected teen sex in any developed country. According to the Centers for Disease Control, only 22 states require sex education, and only 18 require that information

on contraception be provided. This lack of education leaves young people without basic information about their bodies.

According to 2008 data from the CDC, half of teen girls who became pregnant were not on birth control, and 31 percent said they did not think they could get pregnant at the time. Data from 2015 demonstrated that STDs among young people are at an all-time high —1.5 million cases of chlamydia were reported, mostly between people ages 15 to 24.

Research suggests this is indeed due to a lack of education. TIME magazine reported that in 2016, 42 percent of adolescents who had sex did not think they were at risk of infection.

In the U.S., Orenstein said that “consent has become the end of the conversation. Consent is the a baseline, but we need to go beyond that. We n

have a deeper discussion about relationships and physical intimacy with children at a much younger age.”

### ‘I Can Be Vocal’

Lauren survived being called a slut, stopping a rape, experiencing her own trauma. Now, she has finally discovered her voice and understands her worth. But it took her years to recover from her early experiences in Jackson.

In high school, she was afraid to speak out. She saw girls whose lives were made miserable when they did. She made the choice not to, but now she wishes she could have stepped out of the script, to stand up for the younger girls who endured the same treatment she did.

Her healing began in college when she started  
someone who showed her what sex could be,



relationships should be. “It took a while for me to realize that being in a relationship where it’s just expected that you give a guy head and they don’t give a shit about how you feel after wasn’t OK, not the norm, not to be expected,” she said.

Now she knows her boundaries and is unapologetic about asserting them. Recently, she was at a bar when a guy approached her, making advances that made her uncomfortable. She reproached him, unequivocally told him to leave her and her friends alone.

It a sharp contrast from the 14-year-old Lauren who was too scared to tell her parents that her classmates were harassing her. Now, she is in medical school, and grateful, in a way, for the hard-won lessons.

“I can be vocal, I can be appreciated for who I am ” she said. “I have gotten to the point where I do have confidence to say what I’m thinking and what I want.”

with. I can be vocal about what I want. I've made it through this very miserable time and now I can handle myself. No one should have to go through this, but until things change on a larger scale, I'm grateful I can hold my own."

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Emily Figenshau :: Melissa Morton

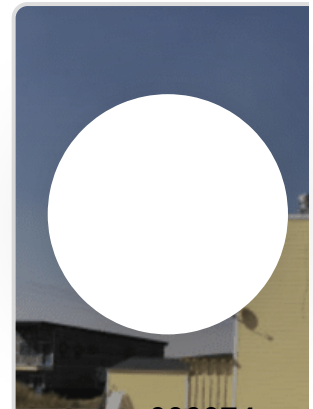
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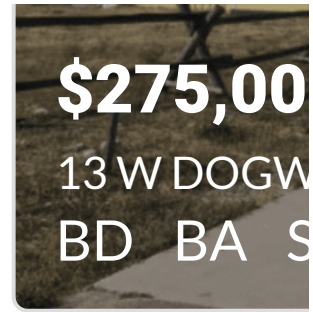
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